Antonin Novotny



**\* December 10, 1904 Prague-Letnany  
† January 28, 1975 Prague**

*Czechoslovak communist politician and President*

The chief representative of the first crisis of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia belonged to the generation which grew up during the First Republic. He became a prominent member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party following the "bolshevisation" in 1929 and then rose to power after the World War II. He was trained as a mechanic and in the years between 1918 and 1935 worked in various firms, in the end in the co-operation Vcela ("Bee") in Prague-Vysocany. Back in 1921 he joined the Czechoslovak Communist Party, soon after it was founded, and held various offices in the party organization in Prague. In 1937-38 as a secretary of the Regional Committee of the CP in Hodonin he performed a paid position for the first time as a party official. When the party was banned in 1938 he again became a worker in the employment of Vcela in Prague-Vysocany while participating in CP illegal work. He was imprisoned from 1941 to 1945 in the Nazi concentration camp in Matthausen.

Immediately after the War he once more began to work as a party official and received the appointment as top secretary of the Regional Committee of CP in Prague (1945-51). In 1946 he was elected for the first time to the Central Committee of the CP and remained its member until May 1968. As a leading functionary of an important Prague CP organization he took a significant share in the events in February 1948 in introducing and strengthening the Communist regime. The period of harsh internal-party purges and the liquidation of R. Slansky signalled his ascent to the power centre: In September 1951 he was elected to the newly established organizational secretariat and in December 1951 to the political secretariat and presidium of the Central Committee of the CP. In September 1953 he was elected as first secretary of the Central Committee of the CP.

This occurred after the death of J.V. Stalin and K. Gottwald that is to say in the initial stage of a relaxation of international tension and following the worst period of Communist terror at home. After Gottwald's death the position of chairman of the party remained vacant and Czechoslovakia adopted the development of a classic model of a Communist regime in which the top man in the party machinery holds both the position of party boss and that of head of state. In 1957, following the death of A. Zapotocky, this was implemented when A. Novotny was also elected President of the Republic. The separation of the two functions was later to signify a superficial expression of a crisis in the regime at the end of 60s and 80s.

In the case of A. Novotny this occurred 15 years after he had adopted this leading position in the state. At the beginning of this period an aftermath of the political trials still lingered - in April 1954 G. Husak was condemned to life imprisonment as a "bourgeois nationalist"; later there were trials with Social Democrats. Nevertheless the pressures from society for a liberalization of conditions became ever more forceful, especially after 1956 when N. Chrushchov revealed the crimes committed under Stalinism. In 1960 A. Novotny declared that socialism had been achieved in Czechoslovakia and this should also be reflected in the name of the country. At this moment in time he also declared a far-reaching amnesty which meant the release from prison of the majority of people condemned in the political trials in the 50s. Subsequently, with various degrees of success, there was an ever greater assertion of various opposition trends in the area of culture and the social sciences. As a result of a continual decline in economic performance A. Novotny was also forced to find a solution in this area. In 1963 a more pragmatic J. Lenart took on the position of prime minister when he replaced the Stalinist V. Siroky. Moreover in 1965 the reform proposals submitted by economist O. Sik were adopted. In 1967 Novotny again wanted to introduce a hard-line policy, but it was too late. Moreover, intellectually he was unable to cope with the tasks at hand and his ad lib public speeches generated liberating laughter (for instance when, following a May 1 demonstration he declared in an ad lib interview *"meat will be shortly"*, which immediately met with nation-wide response when people asked, *"where for goodness sake is Shortly"*.

Since his ascent to a leading position the party machinery and leadership underwent considerable changes. Now functionaries who had been born in the days when the Czechoslovak state came into being and on the whole joined the Czechoslovak CP after the end of World War II predominated. Hence they represented a different generation to that of A. Novotny. The younger members reacted to the pressure from society and in association with the functionaries from Slovakia, whom A. Novotny treated extremely tactlessly, and influenced by the idea that the system could be reformed they removed Novotny from office as First Secretary on the Central Committee of the CP on January 5, 1968 and elected in his place A. Dubcek.

In the following period of the "Prague Spring" A. Novotny was forced under public pressure to abdicate as President of the Republic in March. In May they went as far as to strip him of all his functions and discontinued his membership in the CP. His membership was renewed in the period of "normalization" in 1971 when the Central Committee of the CP adopted a secret resolution. However, Novotny was unable to make a political come back and probably hardly wanted to.